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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which selected course experiences influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing family involvement programs in schools. The subjects were early childhood and elementary teacher education students (N=105) enrolled in a required course entitled "School/Community Relations." They completed pre- and post-assessments related to their ability to work with parents. At the end of the semester, students also wrote reflective statements related to the impact of each of the four major course requirements (conducting parent interviews, developing a parent involvement plan for one year, compiling a parental involvement notebook, and planning and conducting a parent workshop). Student responses from both quantitative and qualitative data supported the premise that completing the four major course assignments enhanced the students' comfort and confidence levels in working with parents. These findings support the premise that course experiences focused on family involvement have the potential to better equip prospective teachers with the skills needed to foster parent-teacher collaboration. (Contains 31 references.) (JLS)

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Family Involvement in Education: The Role of Teacher Education

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Family Involvement in Education:
The Role of Teacher Education

Objectives

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which selected course experiences influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing family involvement programs in schools.The subjects were early childhood and elementary teacher education students enrolled in a required course entitled, "School/Community Relations," that was designed to prepare them to work effectively with families and communities to involve them in educational activities of children.The study was also a useful tool of self inquiry for the instructor to determine if the planned activities and experiences enabled students to meet course objectives.

Perspectives

Research studies demonstrate that family/parent involvement in children's learning influences their achievement and success in school (Arvizu, 1996; Bauch, 1988; Becher, 1986; Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Coleman, 1991; Davies, 1988; Epstein, 1989; Moles, 1993). In addition to increases in learning and higher test scores, Rich (1985) outlines a number of other educational benefits when families are involved in children's schools: increases in student attendance; reduction of student dropouts; improvement of student motivation, self esteem, and behavior; and more parent and community support of the school. However, teachers often do not have the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to collaborate with families effectively because the topic of family involvement in education has not enjoyed a central role in teacher education programs (de Acosta, 1996; Epstein & Dauber,1991; Foster & Loven, 1992; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992; Williams, 1992). The lack of preparation for working with families to involve them in the education of their children remains a weakness in teacher education programs (Bredekamp, 1996).

Only 4 percent of teacher-training institutions in the Southwest offer a course in parent-teacher relations and 15 percent offer part of a course, whereas a majority of the teacher educators, principals, and teachers agree that a course in parent involvement should be required for undergraduate students in elementary education (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). Because of the lack

of initial and inservice training in parent involvement, most teachers usually depend on their every day experience in working with and dealing with parents (Moles, 1993). A study by Chavkin and Williams (1993) demonstrated that parents, regardless of ethnicity or minority group status, are concerned about their children's education and are willing to take an active role in the educational process. However, parents desire more information and guidance from the school. Many professionals agree that it is the responsibility of the school to make the first move in reaching out to families to involve them in the education of their children (Harris, Kagay, & Ross, 1987; NCATE, 1994).

A review of the literature on family involvement in education delineates several obstacles and barriers between parents and teachers that prevent them from communicating openly and working together effectively (Davies, 1993; Gestwicki, 1992; Moles, 1987, 1993). Moles (1993) has identified three categories of obstacles or barriers to family participation in school activities of their children: 1) limited skills and knowledge of teachers and parents, 2) restricted opportunities for interaction, and 3) psychological and cultural barriers. In order to alleviate the barriers to effective parent-teacher collaboration, teacher preparation programs must provide course work that includes developing teachers' special knowledge, attitudes, skills, and strategies to work effectively with families (Bermudez & Padron, 1987; de Acosta, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Foster & Loven, 1992; Houston & Houston, 1992; Williams, 1992; Williams & Chavkin, 1987).

de Acosta (1996) recommended three themes for inclusion in foundation courses designed to enhance the prospective teacher's ability to collaborate with families: family and schools, community and schools, and the context of teaching. These themes, coupled with reflection on practicum experiences with families and community agencies, include many of the ideas that were a part of the course that was the focus of this study as well as recommendations made by other educators and researchers (Bermudez & Padron, 1987; Davies, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Foster & Loven, 1992; Houston & Houston, 1992; Kaplan, 1992; Kochan & Mullins, 1992; Moles, 1993; Williams, 1992; Williams & Chavkin, 1987).

Methods, Techniques and Data Sources

Research Questions. The following research questions were addressed in this study: How have selected course experiences influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and

competence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs? To what extent have course experiences affected the attitudes of preservice teachers toward working with parents?

Subjects. Data were collected from 105 students enrolled in a School/Community Relations course over four semesters. Students enrolled in the elementary education or early childhood education program are required to take this course during the junior year. Eighty-percent of the students were elementary education majors, and 20% were early childhood education majors.

Measures. Students completed pre- and post- self-assessments related to their ability to work with parents. The assessments consisted of 11 items associated with students' knowledge and comfort level in: a) conducting parent conferences or interviews, b) accessing resources needed to develop parent programs, c) planning and implementing parent workshops, d) identifying successful strategies for involving parents in school activities, and e) developing positive relations with parents. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 as low and 5 as high. At the end of the semester, students wrote reflective statements related to the impact of each of the four major course requirements completed (i.e., conducting parent interviews, developing a parent involvement/ education plan for one year, compiling a parental involvement notebook, and planning and conducting a parent workshop), on developing their competence and comfort level in working with parents.

Analyses. Pretest and posttest means were compared using a t-test for dependent samples to determine whether respondents' perceptions changed as a result of course participation. An effect size (ES) estimate representing the magnitude of change in standard deviation units was computed using the formula $ES = (M_2 - M_1) + SD_1$, where ES = the effect size estimate, M_2 = the posttest mean, M_1 = the pretest mean, and SD_1 = the pretest standard deviation. A correlation coefficient was computed based upon the obtained ES for an item and the pretest means, to assess the degree to which change was related to initial status across the set of items.

The research team used a variation of the constant comparative method of data analysis suggested by Strauss (1987) to analyze the qualitative data, by searching for categories of the students' constructs related to their comfort and confidence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs. After individually developing categories, the team collectively compared the categories to generate a set of shared themes. The five major themes that emerged in

the analysis were: 1) previous course assignments, 2) attitudes toward parental involvement, 3) confidence levels of students, 4) responsibility of teachers, and 5) children and families from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

Results

Students' responses from both the quantitative and qualitative data appear to support the premise that completing the 4 major assignments for the School/ Community Relations course (parent interviews, parental involvement plan, parental involvement notebook, and parent workshop) enhanced their comfort and confidence levels in working with parents. Likewise, their responses suggest that the class experiences enhanced their attitudes regarding collaborating with parents to involve them in the school activities of their children. These results are consistent with the findings from a similar study that included a smaller sample of prospective teachers (Morris, Taylor, Knight & Wasson, 1996).

Quantitative Data. On the self-assessment, all t-values for pretest-posttest item mean comparisons were significant at $p < .01$. Students' relatively high mean pretest scores on the self-assessment indicated that they felt somewhat comfortable with their general knowledge about parental involvement, their ability to make a difference in the lives of their students, and their ability to facilitate parental involvement activities. In contrast, items receiving low mean pretest ratings tended to refer to more specific, operational aspects of facilitating parental involvement, such as accessing resources needed to develop a parent involvement plan. While students made significant gains in each of the areas addressed in the assessment, it appears that as a result of participation in the course, they made the greatest gains in acquiring knowledge, skills, and strategies required to plan and implement parent involvement programs.These findings were reinforced by the qualitative data.

Qualitative Data. When analyzing the qualitative data, we looked for reference to other courses where like experiences had been assigned, for attitudes about parental involvement, and for levels of confidence that resulted from the course assignments.We determined two additional themes from our analysis of the 4 assignment areas; the responsibility of teachers to initiate parent-teacher collaboration and working with children and families from diverse racial and cultural groups. Summary statements related to each of the major themes follow.

Table 1

Preservice Teacher Responses to Self-Assessment Related to Working with Parents

N = 105

Assessment Item	Pre-test M	Pre-test SD	Post-test M	Post-test SD	t-value
1. How knowledgeable are you about the elements of an effective conference or interview with parents?	2.39	.92	4.71	.46	23.42*
2. How comfortable are you with your ability to conduct effective conferences or interviews with parents?	2.71	1.03	4.47	.57	16.46*
3. How comfortable are you about accessing resources needed to develop a one-year parent education/ involvement plan for a K-6 school?	2.37	.99	4.63	.58	20.67*
4. How knowledgeable are you about the elements of effective workshops for parents?	1.88	.78	4.83	.40	33.41*
5. How comfortable are you with your ability to plan and implement effective workshops for parents?	2.20	1.02	4.67	.51	22.77*
6. How knowledgeable are you about successful strategies for involving parents in school activities of their children?	2.57	.97	4.61	.55	19.29*
7. How comfortable are you with the process of developing positive relations with parents of children that will be enrolled in your class(es)?	3.36	.96	4.67	.47	12.99*

Table 1, Cont.

Preservice Teacher Responses to Self-Assessment Related to Working with Parents

Assessment Item	Pre-test M	Pre-test SD	Post-test M	Post-test SD	t-value
8. To what extent do you feel that you can make a difference in the lives of the students that will be enrolled in your class(es)?	4.19	.81	4.85	.39	8.11*
9. How knowledgeable are you about the advantages and disadvantages of parental involvement in school activities of their children?	3.06	1.11	4.71	.48	14.76*
10. How comfortable do you feel about your ability to encourage parents to increase their involvement in the school activities of their children?	3.22	.98	4.56	.54	13.78*
11. How knowledgeable are you about the variety of parent involvement activities implemented in school-based and home-based programs?	2.25	.84	4.29	.65	20.90*

Note. Scale: 1 = low, 5 = high. n = 105

* $p < .01$.

• Previous course assignments. We found students seldom experienced the topic of family involvement in prior teacher preparation coursework.

• Attitudes toward parental involvement. Prior to the interviews and education plans, many students felt that parents were indifferent to their children's education. They had believed that it was the parents' fault for not coming to school and sharing in the education of their children. After interviewing the parents, most of the students said that their attitude had changed from negative to positive and that time was the major factor that prevented many parents from being actively involved in school activities.

• Confidence levels of students. Completing each of the 4 major assignments appeared to enhance the students' level of confidence in their ability to work with parents. In particular, the workshop assignment appeared to serve as a major confidence builder for students in their ability to work with parents, their peers, and other professionals. In addition to gaining the knowledge, skills, and strategies to plan and conduct a workshop, students reported increased confidence in their speaking skills.

• Responsibility of teachers. The theme of the importance of teachers and schools making the first move to initiate family involvement in the life of the school was reflected in statements about the interview and educational plan assignments.

• Children and families from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Students noted that they gained knowledge of the importance of awareness and sensitivity in interacting with children and families from different racial and cultural backgrounds and indicated that they would need to adapt to the cultures of the families in order to communicate effectively with them. Students attributed these new insights to the presentation made by a multicultural panel during one of the class sessions.

Although all the assignments appeared to influence comfort and confidence levels as well as attitudes, there appeared to be especially strong relationships between selected assignments or course experiences and related student outcomes: 1) the parent interviews assignment appeared to be a critical first step in affecting student attitudes about the importance of parental involvement and dismantling some of the myths regarding parents' unconcern about their children's education, 2) developing the one-year involvement/education plan appeared to influence strongly the students'

confidence and enthusiasm for developing and implementing successful activities for parents, 3) the completed parental involvement notebook was viewed as a ready resource both for parents and for teachers in planning parent programs and alerted students to the large number of resources that are available to assist in parent involvement and education activities, 4) the parent workshop assignment was perceived primarily in terms of increasing "people skills," the ability to work effectively with parents and other teachers, 5) the parent interview and educational plan assignments appeared to be related to students' recognition that it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to take the leadership in reaching out to families and parents to involve them in the life of the school, and 6) the presentation made by a multicultural panel seemed to contribute to students acquiring new insights required to work effectively with children and families from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Student responses also suggest their recognition that parents' involvement is essential to children's success in school. At the end of the course, most of the students appeared confident and eager to assume the role of teacher-leader for involving families in the education of their children.

Educational Importance of Study

If schools are going to be successful in making significant improvement in the education of children, teachers entering the profession must possess the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and strategies that will enable them to work effectively with students and families from diverse backgrounds. This process of working collaboratively with families is especially critical in improving the educational achievement of children from racial and ethnic minority groups. As teacher educators, we believe that the theme of family involvement in education should be the focus of a required course for all prospective teachers, as well as a topic to be infused in course work throughout the teacher preparation program. Findings from this study appear to support the premise that course experiences focused on family involvement have the potential to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes that enable them to foster effective family/parent-teacher collaboration on behalf of children.

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